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GENERAL BEDFORD FORREST AND
PRACTICAL OPERATIONAL ART ADVICE FOR THE COMMANDER

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of

GENERAL BEDFORD FORREST AND
PRACTICAL OPERATIONAL ART ADVICE FOR THE COMMANDER

Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest has been called the “great central figure of the Civil War” and “the ablest Cavalry general in the South.” His operation into West Tennessee during December 1862 is a good example of a major operation in pursuit of theater operational objectives.

General Forrest, who said he was successful because he always “got there first with the most men,” was assigned two operational objectives in late 1862. The first was to interdict Grant’s invasion of Mississippi; the second, to tie down Union forces in West Tennessee so that they could not be used to reinforce Rosecrans in Middle Tennessee.

The West Tennessee operation contains several lessons that are applicable for today’s and tomorrow’s operational commanders. Key elements of the Operational Idea (Scheme) and aspects of Operational Leadership are examined and practical advice offered for current commanders that is useful regardless of the geographical area, weapons and equipment used, or forces employed.

British military commentator Major General Sir Frederick B. Maurice said of Forrest’s “first with the most” statement, “There we have in eight words the gist of many volumes of Jomini and Clausewitz.” Our study of this historical example and the thoughtful application of its lessons will pay great dividends on battlefields of the future.

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Introduction and Methodology

Human life is too short to obtain the practical knowledge necessary to operate successfully at the operational level. This can be acquired only by a critical study of military history. Operational commanders should be “students of history,” —Milan Vego, 1998

Helmut von Moltke said the study of history is “the most effective means of teaching war during peace,” and even Admiral Mahan stated, “historical examples are more valuable than principles, because by being narrative of the past events they are a story of practical experience.” Even so, there are pitfalls in blindly applying what appear to be lessons of the past to war in the future. Again, as Vego puts it, we should not have the “illusion that study of military history can show us the path to the future.”

What this research paper will attempt to do is to examine an historical case, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest’s first raid into West Tennessee in December 1862, identify specific aspects of the Operational Art, then translate those “lessons learned” into practical advice for today’s operational commander. This advice and these lessons learned are ones that are applicable today and tomorrow, no matter the part of the world, the weapons systems employed, or the forces used. General Forrest’s December 1862 raid constituted a major operation that accomplished theater operational level objectives in the Western Theater of the American War Between the States.

Scholars have called him the greatest cavalryman in the history of this country. Contemporaries knew him as the “Wizard of the Saddle.” When asked to name the greatest soldier produced on either side during the war, Robert E. Lee was said to have replied, “A man I have never seen, sir. His name is Forrest.”¹ Ulysses S. Grant rated him as “the ablest cavalry general in the South.”² To General William T. Sherman, he was “that devil Forrest,”

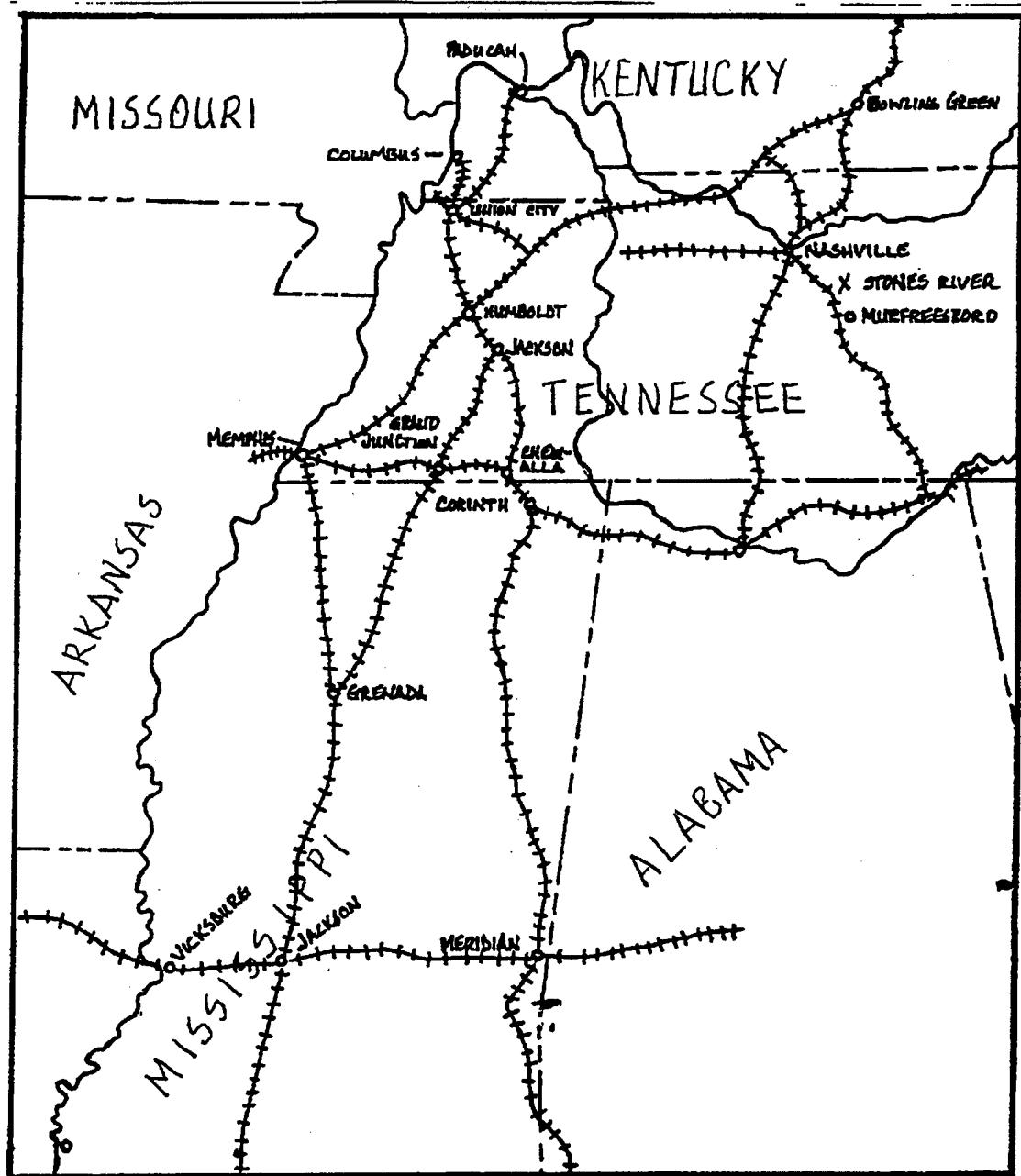
who must be "hunted down and killed if it costs ten thousand lives and bankrupts the Federal treasury."³ Later, as he explained how he won his victories, Forrest said he did so "by getting there first with the most men, planning and making my own fight, never letting the other fellow make the fight for me . . ."⁴ The importance and relevance for us and future operational commanders is not so much the praise given to General Forrest, but the identification and then skillful application of the lessons we can learn from him.

Other students have used Forrest to demonstrate aspects of Operational Leadership, but both focused on his victory at the Battle of Brice's Crossroads in June 1864.⁵ I prefer this earlier example, since the operation was specifically oriented at operational theater objectives and a commander that had less wartime experience conducted it.

Forrest's raid into West Tennessee during December 1862 accomplished two operational objectives in the Western Theater. The first was to threaten Union General Ulysses S. Grant's advance on Vicksburg by severing his lines of communication northward. The second was to tie down the considerable Union forces in West Tennessee to prevent those troops being used to reinforce General William S. Rosecrans, whose army was facing General Braxton Bragg's Confederate army in Middle Tennessee.⁶ (See Map #1)

Historical Context

General Grant, then moving overland south through Mississippi toward Vicksburg, was forced by the raid to pull his forces back into southern Tennessee. By destroying much of the railroads between Jackson, Tennessee, and Columbus, Kentucky, Forrest cut Grant "off from all communication with the north for more than a week, and it was more than two weeks before rations or forage could be issued from stores obtained in the regular way."⁷



Map # 1, the Western Theater

Source: Drawn by the author from various sources.

Grant wrote General Sherman that Forrest "cut me off from supplies, so that further advance by this route is perfectly impracticable."⁸ Since Grant required secure lines of communication, Forrest's raid was a key factor in delaying Grant's land campaign against Vicksburg, "saving that fortress to the Confederacy for yet another six months."⁹

General Rosecrans, newly in command of the Union army around Nashville, faced General Bragg in Middle Tennessee. Although Rosecrans outnumbered Bragg 47,000 to 38,000, it was not a decisive margin, as was demonstrated in the battle at Stones River (29 December 1862-3 January 1863), which was technically a draw.¹⁰ After Stones River, however, Rosecrans failed to pursue Bragg's army as Grant suggested and did not resume the offensive until 24 June 1863, only ten days before Vicksburg eventually surrendered.¹¹ By threatening the various communication and supply centers in West Tennessee, Forrest had tied down the several thousand Union troops garrisoned there, preventing their reinforcing Rosecrans and possibly prompting his earlier movement against Bragg.

General Forrest's raid had the desired operational effect on the enemy in the Western Theater. Grant was forced to abandon his overland advance to the south on Vicksburg until May 1863 and Rosecrans was unable to reinforce his army sufficiently to rapidly force Bragg out of Tennessee.¹² This operational effect supported the strategic and Western Theater objectives of the defense of the Confederacy and the eventual defeat of the Union army in the West.

Summary of the Operation

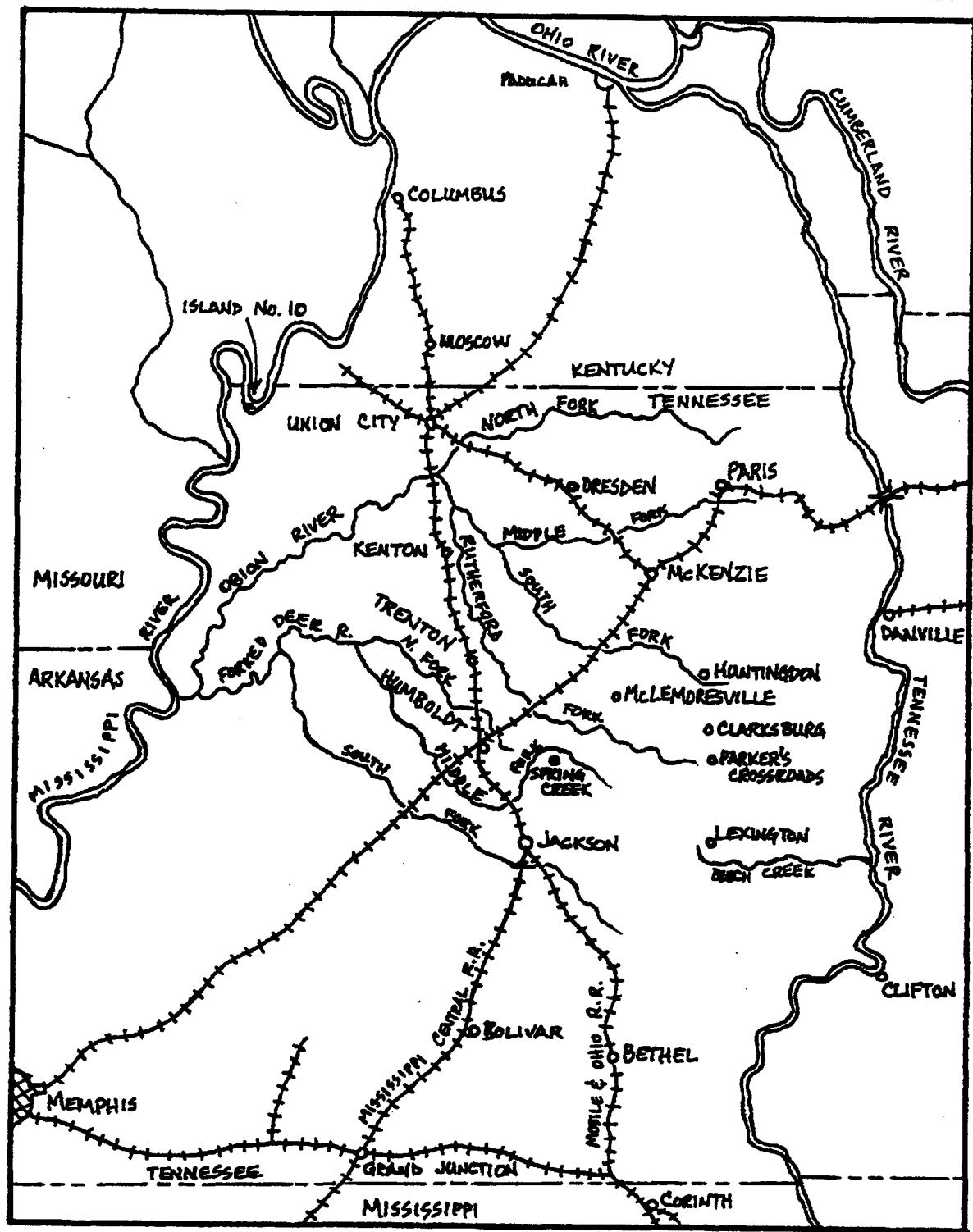
General Forrest received his orders on 30 September 1862. After fighting with General Bragg into Kentucky, Forrest was to turn over command of the veteran brigade that

he had organized himself, then proceed to Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and establish another headquarters.¹³

Within six weeks of his arrival in Murfreesboro, Forrest had accumulated a formidable body of men primarily through recruitment. He was a charismatic leader who was well known for his recent successes and was very popular in the middle Southern states. About one half of the men of this command had no other arms than the shotguns and squirrel rifles which they had brought with them from home. Colonel George B. Dibrell's Eighth Tennessee Cavalry had 400 flintlock muskets—obsolete by any measure. After General Bragg turned down his requests for equipment, Forrest realized he would have to equip this brigade by the same method he had used before: at the expense of the enemy.¹⁴

General Forrest fully appreciated the difficulty of the mission he had been given. He was to cross the Tennessee River, three-quarters of a mile in width, whose western bank was picketed by the cavalry of General Grant's mighty and victorious army. Once in West Tennessee, he could escape only by recrossing this formidable barrier. The river was patrolled by a fleet of Union gunboats whose only purpose was to prevent incursions from the east or, if one was made, to prevent escape.

On 10 December, General Forrest received his orders to move. He again appealed for guns and ammunition and was told none were available. He already had dispatched a detachment of men to the vicinity of Clifton, on the Tennessee River, to build and conceal two flatboats that would be used as ferries. Forrest arrived in Clifton on 15 December with his brigade of approximately 2,100 men and Captain Freeman's artillery battery of seven pieces.¹⁵ (See Map #2.)



Map #2, West Tennessee

Source: Drawn by the author from various sources.

It took two days to cross the river, since each flatboat could carry no more than 25 horses and riders at a time. Sentries were strung out in both directions along the river to warn of approaching gunboats. This security measure, combined with most of the crossing being done at night, saved Forrest from being engaged, but not from being found out. As a deception once across the river, Forrest had his men build two to three times more campfires than needed on the first night. He then invited some of the local people into his camp and paraded his dismounted troopers as if they were infantry to the accompaniment of a number of kettledrums his troops carried. Word soon spread that Forrest had crossed the Tennessee with between 10,000 and 20,000 infantry, supported by cavalry and artillery. Forrest's misinformation campaign later included paroled prisoners, who spread the intelligence that the Southern commander carefully crafted for them.¹⁶ These reports were believable enough to cause General Jeremiah C. Sullivan, the Union commander at Jackson, Tennessee, to request permission from Grant to consolidate his forces. General Thomas A. Davies, the commander at Columbus, Kentucky, on the Mississippi River, also reported that he had ordered reinforcements (Map #2).¹⁷

Early on 18 December, as Forrest moved toward Lexington, he came in contact with Union cavalry and a section of artillery. After a skirmish, the Federals withdrew toward Lexington to Beech Creek, where they were able to reform in a better position. They fought stubbornly, but were finally driven back.

As the Confederates continued to the immediate vicinity of Lexington, they were taken again under fire by artillery and cavalry. Captain Frank B. Gurley, Fourth Alabama, saw the folly of a frontal assault on this position, so he swung to his right to take advantage

of a ravine that would allow his men to get within 100 yards of the guns before being exposed. Gurley's command, followed by the rest of the Fourth Alabama, charged and completely overran the enemy. About 150 Federals and a section of artillery were captured.¹⁸ The commander, Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll, later reported that Forrest's force was "at least 5,000 strong," twice its actual size.¹⁹ The remaining Federal force retreated precipitately in the direction of Jackson, and was pursued to within sight of the city by Forrest's troopers on the evening of 18 December.

Forrest's movement on Jackson was entirely a feint, since the town was heavily garrisoned and well fortified. While in the immediate vicinity of Jackson, Forrest sent regiments both north of the city to break Mobile and Ohio Railroad tracks and south of Jackson to destroy bridges, culverts, and trestles of the Mississippi Central Railroad leading from Bolivar and the Mobile and Ohio leading from Corinth, Mississippi. Additional Union forces and large quantities of arms and ammunition were captured, some of which replaced Dibrell's flintlocks with modern weapons.

Keeping the Union defenders well inside their fortifications while his men did their work around Jackson was essential. On the morning of 19 December, Forrest made a great show of assault on the city. Once he saw the Federals inside their breastworks, he withdrew all but a few skirmishers and moved rapidly north to attack Trenton and Humboldt. Forrest split his force, leaving a rear guard at Spring Creek, north of Jackson, sending one regiment to capture Humboldt, and leading the rest in an attack on Trenton (Map #2).

Humboldt fell quickly in the face of a rapidly executed cavalry charge. More prisoners were captured, Union supplies burned, and the railroad depot and a trestle bridge were destroyed. Forrest arrived in Trenton the afternoon of 20 December and attacked

immediately. He received heavy fire from Union sharpshooters, so Forrest retired and surrounded the Federals, then opened fire with his artillery. Three volleys later the garrison surrendered; Forrest captured 700 prisoners, several hundred horses, and large quantities of supplies and ammunition.²⁰

On 21 December, Forrest moved north toward Union City and reassembled his force. Trestles, bridges, and rails were destroyed from Trenton to Kenton station; the destruction of an extensive trestle over the Obion River north of Kenton delayed the Confederates two days. Forrest captured Union City on 23 December without firing a shot. Crossing the Kentucky state line the same day, Forrest reached Moscow, continuing the destruction of railroads and bridges. Various detachments worked near Moscow and on trestles over the forks of the Obion River until Christmas Day. The day before, Forrest wrote, "We have made a clean sweep of the Federals and roads north of Jackson."²¹

The fear of Forrest among Union commanders was such that General Davies, commanding more than 5,000 men at Columbus, Kentucky, would not move against him. Even General Halleck, the Union General in Chief, had warned Davies to take no chances. Davies went so far as to have the heavy guns on Island Number 10 in the Mississippi River spiked and the powder thrown in the river to prevent their capture by Forrest. Sylvanus Cadawaller, reporter for the Chicago *Times*, observed that of all the Confederate cavalry commanders in the West, Forrest was the only one whom General Grant sincerely dreaded. Grant said Forrest was "amenable to no known rules of procedure, was a law to himself for all military acts, and was constantly doing the unexpected, at all times and places."²²

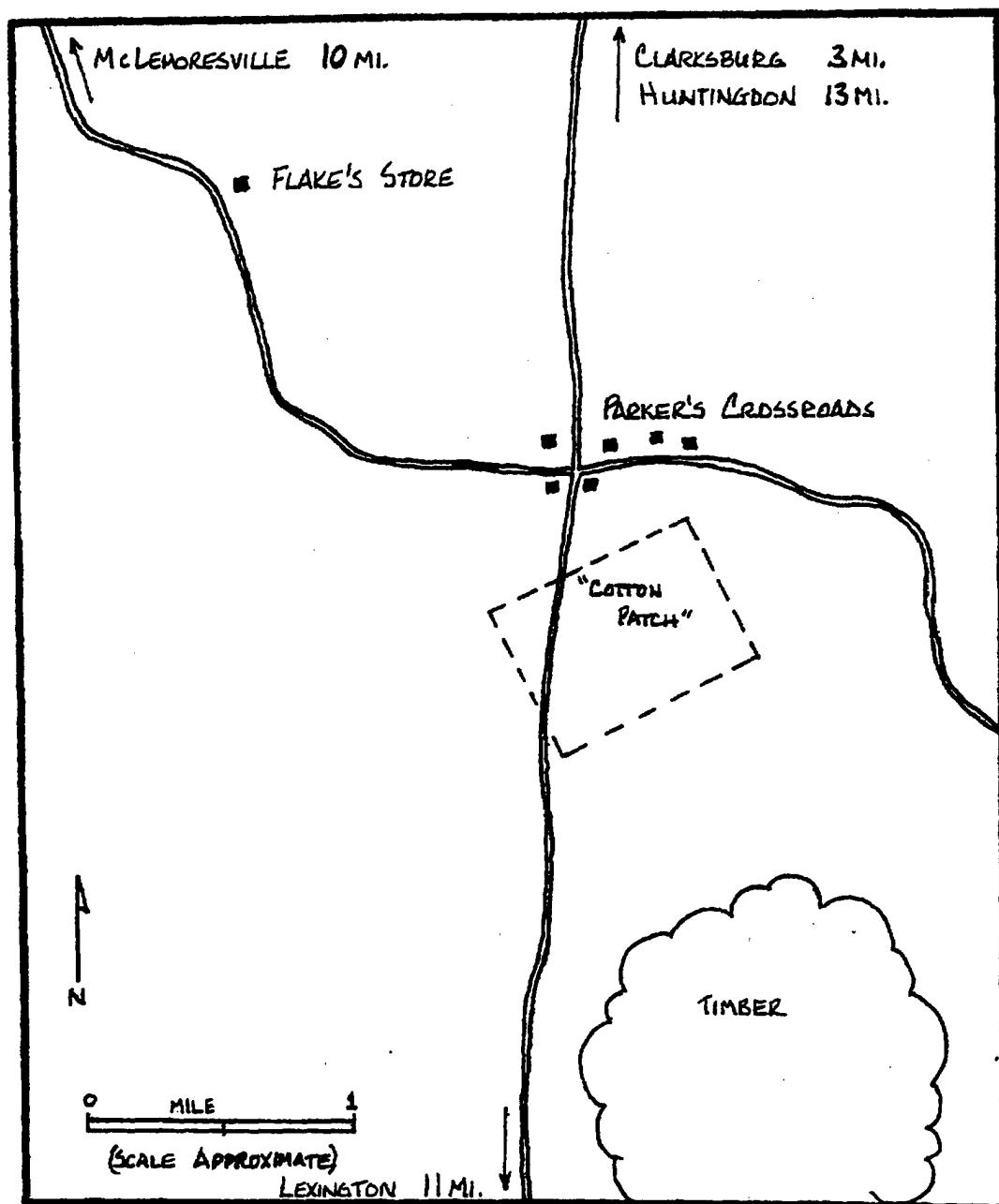
With one exception (the Forked Deer River), not a bridge was left on the Mobile and Ohio Railroad between Jackson, Tennessee, and Moscow, Kentucky. All the trestles and

culverts were destroyed, and the tracks over sixty miles of the distance had been ruined by building fires that caused the rails to buckle. Forrest now turned southeast from Union City toward Dresden and McKenzie, and on 26 December destroyed the bridge over the north fork of the Obion River on the line from Dresden to Paducah, Kentucky. That night, he arrived in Dresden, destroyed supplies and the railroad, then camped for the night. The next day, he moved to McKenzie, where he learned that two brigades of infantry were moving to intercept him and that all of the bridges over the Obion, which lay across his path, were destroyed and had Union guards.

Forrest discovered that one bridge, considered so unsafe as to be impassable, had been overlooked by the enemy and might still be available. This bridge, halfway between McKenzie and McLemoresville, had more than a half-mile of causeway stretched over the swampy bottoms and required considerable repair. Forrest personally drove the first wagon across the rickety, slippery span late on 28 December, then kept his brigade concealed in the bottoms of the Obion River.

The two Union infantry brigades sent to intercept Forrest were located at Huntingdon (Colonel John W. Fuller) and Clarksburg (Colonel Cyrus L. Dunham). Forrest's force was nearly exhausted by the constant work and marching, the lack of rest, and the cold, wet weather. He knew, however, that to make a run for the Tennessee River would allow the Federals to trap him between the gunboats in the river and the infantry. Forrest decided to attack and defeat Dunham's brigade first, then turn and defeat Fuller. This would happen 31 December, at Parker's Crossroads (See Map #3).

Colonel Dunham moved his brigade south toward Parker's Crossroads early on 31 December and made contact with Forrest's pickets. Forrest immediately dispatched a four-



Map #3, Parker's Crossroads Vicinity

Source: Drawn by author from various sources.

company blocking force to Dunham's rear to block Fuller's advance from Huntingdon, then rapidly move his brigade to separate the Union forces and prevent communication between them. Forrest planned to use primarily his artillery to defeat Dunham at Parker's, keeping his other troops relatively fresh to fight Fuller.

At Parker's Crossroads, Forrest pounded Dunham with his artillery. The Federals were driven back to what became known as the "cotton patch" just south of Parker's, then to a stand of timber farther south toward Lexington. Colonel A. A. Russell's Fourth Alabama and Colonel James W. Starnes' Fourth Tennessee were sent south of Dunham to capture his supply trains and cut off his retreat. With this done and most of the Union artillery captured, Dunham was about to surrender when Forrest was astonished by firing in his rear. Fuller had arrived from Huntingdon, unhampered by the blocking force.²³

Forrest now found himself caught squarely between two lines of battle, each equal to or greater than his in firepower. Here another of the Confederate's famous statements was uttered. Colonel Charles Carroll of Forrest's staff rode up excitedly and asked, "General, what shall we do? What shall we do?" Forrest's instant reply was, "Charge them both ways!"²⁴

Charge them both ways they did, although Starnes and Russell deserve a great deal of credit for understanding their commander's intent. Their regiments had encircled Dunham's brigade, meeting in his rear. When Starnes heard the firing in Forrest's rear, he and Russell attacked Dunham from the south, thereby keeping his force engaged while Forrest led the charge north against Fuller. This charge against Fuller's lead unit was so determined that the Federals immediately took the defensive (and stayed there until daylight the next day), allowing Forrest to escape with his brigade mostly intact. This, nevertheless, was an unusual

loss for Forrest. Besides approximately 300 of his men captured and perhaps 100 killed and wounded, he lost three captured artillery pieces and six wagonloads of ammunition "which, by a mistake of orders, were driven right into the enemy's line." Even in this debacle, however, he captured as many men as the Federals and almost certainly inflicted more casualties than he suffered.²⁵

By this time, the Federals in West Tennessee were closing in on Forrest and he had no time to lose. He sent a detachment ahead to the Tennessee River to prepare the flatboats, which had been concealed by sinking them. Arriving in Lexington late New Year's Eve, Forrest stopped a few hours to care for the wounded and feed and rest the animals and men, then departed about 0200 New Year's Day 1863. About noon the brigade reached the river, again near Clifton. He hurried four guns across on the first boat, then had them deploy to protect the crossing. The flatboats were loaded with as many men and as much equipment as they would carry and the animals were made to swim across the river. Some troops constructed rafts of logs and fence rails as part of an effort that conveyed almost 2,000 men and horses, six artillery pieces, and a train of wagons and captured stores across the Tennessee in a period of only ten hours.²⁶

Forrest's operation into West Tennessee lasted 16 days, from 17 December, when he completed passage of the Tennessee, until 1 January, when he recrossed the river. For nearly a week of this time, heavy rain, sleet, and snow fell in a part of the country with terrible roads. Forrest marched about 300 miles with wagons and artillery, averaging "about the same rate of speed Guderian's tanks swept through Poland in 1939." Large numbers of Federal troops were tied down in West Tennessee. General Grant's army of invasion in Mississippi had its northward lines of communication severed, weakening it and forcing

Grant to abandon the overland route against Vicksburg. Additionally, Forrest was able to prevent reinforcements from going from the various, sizeable garrisons in West Tennessee to General Rosecrans at Murfreesboro. Approximately 2,500 Union soldiers were either killed, wounded, or captured. Forrest had accomplished the purposes for which he was sent into West Tennessee.²⁷

What Can We Learn?

There are numerous lessons and opportunities for advice in the example of Forrest's raid. My examination will begin by looking at selected elements of the Operational Idea (Scheme)²⁸ and then aspects of Operational Leadership and Operational Vision.²⁹

One of the first elements of the Operational Idea (Scheme) Vego discusses is the Method for Defeating the Enemy. Forrest employed "indirect action" by cutting off and interdicting the enemy lines of communication, since he lacked the overwhelming forces to use direct action against the Union forces. This attacked Grant's center of gravity, which at this time was his army that was moving south through Mississippi toward Vicksburg.

Advice: Employ your smaller, but highly trained, force against the enemy where he has fewer forces (or less massed effects) to attack a vulnerability that will weaken and frustrate his purpose.

Forrest used Operational Deception very well against the Union commanders in his deception at the initial crossing of the Tennessee River. The notion that Forrest had 10,000 to 20,000 troops had wide-ranging effects throughout that portion of the theater: garrisons were withdrawn, reinforcements were requested, and most dramatically, the big guns on Island Number 10 in the northwest corner of Tennessee were destroyed. Forrest's use of

paroled prisoners kept up the deception by manipulating his enemy's perceptions and expectations; even General Halleck, the General in Chief in Washington, was fooled. As Commander Critz reminds us, "The GOAL OF THE DECEPTION (sic) is to somehow mislead this opposing military commander, prompting him to plan and conduct his activities in a manner that unwittingly serves our objectives."³⁰

Advice: Capitalize on your reputation by reinforcing in the enemy commander his "worst case scenario" of what you might accomplish against him. Whether you are physically capable of executing that scenario is immaterial if he believes it. Many of our prospective enemies rely primarily on Human Intelligence (HUMINT); Forrest exploited HUMINT adroitly.

The Army's FM 100-5, "Operations," states, "In its simplest expression, operational art determines when, where, and for what purpose major forces will fight." This follows directly the element of the Operational Idea, "Application of Combat Power." Throughout Forrest's operation, he employed this technique, though usually at the tactical level. Nevertheless, his reasons and concepts are applicable to the operational level, as well. Examples are the feint at Jackson, the methods used to capture towns north of Jackson, and the charges at Parker's Crossroads. Taken together, they are part of the major operation supporting theater objectives.

Advice: Similar to indirect action, employ your force against a vulnerability of the enemy; also, using it "asymmetrically" (varying where and how you use "mass" and "economy of force") instead of "symmetrically" against his strengths and weaknesses is usually more effective.

Forrest employed the element Sustainment in an unorthodox way. To argue that this was Operational Sustainment may be somewhat of a stretch, but his method of supplying and resupplying his forces from the enemy did eliminate his need for a secure line of communication and a designated base of operation. Had Grant been able to do the same thing in Mississippi, Forrest's operation would have lost much of its effect and likely would have failed to accomplish one of his objectives. Additionally, as Captain Helms points out, ". . . operational logistics is concerned with the establishment and maintenance of sustainment bases, the conduct of civil affairs, the evacuation of noncombatants, and the *procurement of logistics support from other sources* (emphasis added)."³¹

Advice: Using enemy supplies in this day and time is probably unrealistic. Today's commander should not forget that other "non-service" methods might exist. Exploring possibilities of local purchase or even outsourcing and privatization may result in an innovative solution to an old problem.

Forrest demonstrated the element Anticipating Culmination Point (at the tactical level) in the vicinity of Parker's Crossroads in how he chose to fight Dunham's and Fuller's brigades. He realized his force was nearly worn out by the incessant work, riding, and fighting, and chose a tactical scheme that supported him. He was well aware of the condition of his unit because he was there among it. At the operational level, it is frequently difficult to anticipate the culminating point—sometimes until it actually occurs—due to the innumerable contributing factors.

Advice: Know your forces, keep communication flowing, stay aware. It is only by personal knowledge of the condition of your force gained by communication and observation can you employ this piece of "art" in the Operational Art.

The “central theme” of Forrest’s operation could be said to be the elements of Operational Tempo and Operational Momentum. He repeatedly and continuously beat his enemy in Tempo by employing the “combination of mobility, quality and reliability of intelligence, command, control, and communications and combat service support.”³² Forrest generally got *there* (the decisive place) *first* (at the critical time) with the *most men* (superior force/massed effects). I have already addresses some of these, but an additional example of the use of intelligence in maintaining Tempo and Momentum is Forrest’s ability to find the one remaining bridge over the Obion River to out-maneuver his opponent. His combination of speed and mass (Momentum) was beyond the ability of the Union commanders.

Advice: The concepts of using speed and agility to stay inside our enemy’s Observe/Orient/Decide/Act (OODA) Loop are key, and should be practiced routinely in *training* as well as in actual operations. Opportunities to employ Tempo are frequently fleeting: a well-trained command team will enable you to capitalize on them.

Volumes could be written about how Forrest demonstrated Operational Leadership during the operation in West Tennessee. Two of the authors mentioned previously, Gunn and Sanders, focused on it alone. Vego states, “Operational leadership provides the interface between national or coalition policy and military strategy and tactics.” Forrest demonstrated virtually all of the character traits that are required, but some stand out. He was tough-minded and able to act decisively and independently, and he possessed an undeniably high degree of courage and self-confidence. He had a natural propensity for combat command and he trusted his subordinates and allowed them to exercise initiative in the various independent actions on which he sent them. Forrest had spent time with his subordinate commanders, so they understood his commander’s intent. The best example of this

understanding of intent is in the “charge both ways” at Parker’s Crossroads. Starnes’ and Russell’s immediate, almost intuitive, charge into Dunham’s force to allow Forrest to charge Fuller’s brigade most likely saved the day; Forrest’s losses undoubtedly would have been greater had they not acted so quickly.

As Grant noted, Forrest “. . . was a law to himself for all military acts, and was constantly doing the unexpected . . .” Innovation is a requirement for the operational leader. Forrest probably owed his to his lack of formal military training, which freed him to attack military problems with his frontiersman’s common sense and determination.

Advice: Character may be mostly determined by the time one becomes an operational commander, but study and self discipline can always improve it—it is a necessity for successful command. Demand much from your troops, train them, and ensure they are trained well. Note Forrest’s personal example when he drove the first wagon across the rickety Obion bridge; be visible to your force. “Do not take counsel of your fears” and be innovative. Lastly, *think operationally* and maintain your operational vision (recognize the kind of fight you are in and see the road to victory).³³

Conclusion

The operational significance of the West Tennessee operation of December 1862 has perhaps been overshadowed by events that followed it and better-known operations in the Eastern Theater. That it was planned and executed by a self-taught Memphis businessman with no military training whatsoever makes it even more remarkable. The study of this type of historical example can provide insights that will pay great dividends on the battlefields of the future as long as we are able to identify specific and applicable lessons for today and

tomorrow. "Military leadership texts are full of motherhood and profound aphorisms about operational leadership;"³⁴ it is incumbent upon us to make them practically useful. In that vein, study of General Bedford Forrest should not be overlooked, since "had his genius for war been reinforced by a proper education and a systematic military training, he would have won a still higher place among the great soldiers of the world."³⁵

Notes

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³³ Captain Barney Rubel, "Operational Level Leadership, NWC 1032," (U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 1996), 3.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Wyeth, 578.

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